

Historical Note on the Great Mix-up: Gakkhar and Khokhar in Punjab History

In 1996, the first edition of Aitzaz Ahsan's book 'The Indus Saga and the Making of Pakistan' was published [1]. This book was later republished from India in 2005 as 'The Indus Saga: From Pataliputra to Partition' with almost the same contents [2]. The book has been generally well received on both sides of the border and has remained in print for more than two decades. In the book, the author has put forward the thesis that the territory dominated by the river Indus and its many tributaries, the so called Indus valley, has an identity quite distinct from the rest of the Indian subcontinent. As the major part of the Indus valley is now situated in the territory that constitutes the present-day state of Pakistan, it only seems logical to assume that the country and the nation should be considered natural successors to the Indus valley civilization. The author has acknowledged the valor of many sons of the soil who throughout history resisted foreign invaders descending on the Indus valley for conquest and plunder. One of these chevaliers was Jasrat Gakkhar, who in the aftermath of the invasion of India by the emperor Taimur (1336-1405), founder of the Timurid dynasty, rose to great power and fame in the Punjab and managed to achieve a legendary status. The author has made an error in identifying Jasrat as a Gakkhar. He is not the only one who has made this mistake as will become apparent in the following paragraphs.

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The presumed Gakkhar warrior referred to above was in reality a Khokhar. From the extant historical record, we know that Jasrat was a brother of Shaikha, the Khokhar chief dominant in the Rechna doab towards the very end of the 14th century [3, 4]. In 1393-94, taking advantage of the weakening control of the Delhi sultanate on its provinces, Shaikha decided to expand his influence and occupied Lahore. Both Shaikha and Jasrat confronted the army of emperor Taimur as he passed through the Punjab on his way to attack Delhi in 1398-99. Shaikha Khokhar later submitted to the emperor and was allowed to retain his possessions. Some time afterwards, Shaikha was charged with treachery by the prince Pir Muhammad (1376-1407), a grandson of the emperor Taimur who briefly succeeded him as king of the Timurid empire as well, and was put to death. Jasrat was made a captive and taken to Samarqand. He managed to escape, returned to the Punjab, became head of his tribe, and settled at the Khokhar stronghold of Sialkot [4, 5]. In the subsequent years, Jasrat Khokhar was heavily involved in the regional politics and his power steadily grew. He ultimately came into conflict with the Delhi sultanate and vigorously challenged its authority for more than two decades. At multiple instances, he overran vast swathes of territory in the Punjab, which invited chastisement from the central authority in Delhi. Jasrat Khokhar's fortune was mixed but he remained a potent threat till the last years of the Sayyid dynasty. The Khokhar influence in the Punjab suffered a sharp blow when the chief of the Lodhi tribe Bahlul Khan (d. 1489), the ambitious governor of

Lahore and Dipalpur who would later found the Lodhi dynasty, compelled Jasrat to negotiate a peace and retire to his original territory [4].

The identity of Jasrat as a Khokhar chieftain has never been in doubt. The mix-up or confusion surrounding Gakkhars and Khokhars in the Punjab history is the handiwork of a small group of well meaning orientalist chroniclers, who erroneously ascribed some parts of the history of the Khokhars to the Gakkhars. The most well known example of this misattribution is an article that was published in the 'Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal' in 1871 [6]. An attempt was made to address the inaccuracy of the historical descriptions by the linguist Henry G. Raverty in 1888 but the practice of misattribution generally continued [5]. In the beginning of the 20th century, there was a renewed effort to analyze the historical events concerning Gakkhars and Khokhars in their right perspective starting with an article that appeared in 'The Indian Antiquary' in 1907 [7]. This was followed by more detailed notes in several later publications [8]. The historical episodes that were mistakenly attributed to the Gakkhars are generally absent from their traditional chronicle Kaigoharnama written in Farsi [9, 10]. During the latter half of the 19th century, manuscripts of Kaigoharnama were not uncommon. Multiple versions of the book were available for reference and consultation in many government and private collections. Majority of the British historians and authors were unfamiliar with the Farsi language otherwise even a cursory look at any manuscript of the Kaigoharnama would have provided them with a reason to re-examine inaccuracies in their descriptions of the Gakkhar history.

The linguist Henry G. Raverty carried out a detailed analysis of the mix-up of Gakkhar and Khokhar historical accounts [5]. He identified two extant translations of 'Tarikh-e-Ferishta', the well known history of the Indian subcontinent authored by Muhammad Qasim Ferishta during the early years of the 17th century, as the principal sources of all confusion. The translations in question were carried out by the British authors Alexander Dow in 1768 and John Briggs in 1829, respectively [3, 11-13]. In Raverty's opinion, both translators were not able to comprehend and decipher the linguistic intricacy of the Farsi terms used for Gakkhar and Khokhar and any variations thereof. Hence, Dow used the term 'Gickers' and Briggs used the term 'Gukkurs' invariably for both Gakkhars and Khokhars, throughout. For anyone reading these translations without referring to other sources of the history of the Indian subcontinent, it would not have been possible to separate the two distinct groups of people and their historical accounts. These translations became the most quoted ones and the mix-up perpetuated throughout the works of later historians with rare exceptions.

The practice of mixing-up the historical descriptions of Gakkhars and Khokhars has reduced in frequency nowadays but we can still find instances where the historians were not able to differentiate between the two. This error may raise questions about the veracity of the

scholarship presented in an otherwise well planned research work or it may indicate that the historian was somehow constrained from carrying out a more rigorous analysis for want of one skill or another. In this regard, unfamiliarity with the Farsi language is the most serious limitation as nearly all primary sources dealing with late medieval and early modern history of India were originally written in Farsi and their translations at times could be erroneous as illustrated in the previous paragraph. Agha Hussain Hamadani's book 'The Frontier Policy of the Delhi Sultans' is an example of the error of the first kind where the author incorrectly ascribed the historical account of Khokhars to the Gakkhars throughout the book while Naveed Ahmad Khan's article published in the 1992 issue of the 'Pakistan Archaeology' is the error of the second kind, as the author misinterpreted the Farsi term Gakkhar as Khokhar despite referring to the primary source i.e. 'The Alamgir Namah' in the text [14-17].

Khokhars remained dominant throughout Punjab for hundreds of years but their power gradually declined during and after the middle of the 15th century. Even during the twilight years of their influence, they were in a position to contribute 3,175 horsemen and 37,600 foot soldiers to the Mughal empire [18, 5]. Gakkhars on the other hand were always confined to the Pothohar region. In their traditional territory, they were undoubtedly the leading clan. Their contact with the Mughal dynasty and the subsequent alliance during the first quarter of the 16th century enabled them to achieve unparalleled ascendancy in all of the Sindh Sagar and parts of the Jech (Chenhat) doabs. They successfully retained this ascendancy for the next two hundred and fifty years [5, 17]. The rise and fall of the Gakkhars in the early modern period of the history of the Punjab is intertwined with the rise and fall of the Mughal empire in the Indian subcontinent.

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